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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 001570

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/23/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [KDEM](#) [JO](#)
SUBJECT: THE IAF'S ENTOURAGE

REF: A. AMMAN 1446
[1](#)B. AMMAN 535
[1](#)C. AMMAN 1139

Classified By: Ambassador David Hale
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Higher Coordinating Committee of National Opposition Parties (HCCNOP) is a group of seven Jordanian political parties which is dominated by the Islamic Action Front (IAF), the political wing of Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood. The committee, originally formed to counter Jordan's normalization of relations with Israel, is now a one-stop shop for anti-government statements and demonstrations. The IAF's open support for Hamas, however, makes many committee members uncomfortable, and has resulted in public spats. Self interest keeps the committee together - the small parties get access to the IAF's bully pulpit, and the IAF amplifies its message through the appearance of broad agreement among political actors. The committee is unlikely to morph into a political party any time soon, but the idea is certainly out there. End Summary.

Friends With Benefits

[1](#)2. (C) The committee was founded in 1994, shortly after the re-emergence of political party life in Jordan, as a reaction to the establishment of diplomatic relations between Jordan and Israel. It was organized to coordinate anti-normalization messages and action among contrarian political parties. Since then, its political agenda has expanded to include Jordanian internal politics, social policy, the economic sphere, and a wide variety of political issues unrelated to normalization. The committee often acts as an effective proxy or wingman for the IAF when it is politically inconvenient or impossible for the party to act alone. In doing so, the committee issues frequent media statements in support of IAF political positions, applies for demonstration permits when the IAF is denied permission to hold public gatherings, and provides a varied cast of supporting voices at otherwise IAF-only rallies.

[1](#)3. (C) Current members of the committee include: the Islamic Action Front, the Democratic People's (Hashd) Party, the Jordanian Communist Party, the National Movement for Direct Democracy, the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party, the Ba'ath Arab Progressive Party, and the Democratic Popular Unity Party (for more information on these parties, see Ref A). Under the previous political parties law, the committee had fourteen parties under its umbrella. Seven of those parties faded away when they were unable to meet the membership requirements of the new law (Refs B and C). Ahmad 'Aliya, Secretary General of the Hashd Party, told us that the seven parties who failed to make the cut are "unofficially still part of the committee" and still attend some meetings. Other than the optic of seven parties versus fourteen, the shrunken membership of the committee has so far had little impact on its general mission. The International Republican Institute's country director, who has regular contact with the committee's various parties, notes that for those

involved, "it's nice to have a long list of allies at a protest. That list is shorter now."

¶4. (C) By mutual agreement, chairmanship of the committee rotates every three months. The chair organizes the agenda and topics of discussion for the committee's weekly meetings.

More often than not, those discussions are driven by the events of the day, but the parties are also free to focus discussion around issues of concern to them. As the debate congeals around a particular issue, a common opinion emerges.

That opinion is then usually crafted into a press statement that the parties release at a formal press conference.

The Issues At Hand

¶5. (C) Anti-normalization remains the foundation of the committee, and the one issue that can bring such disparate groups as Islamists, Communists, and Ba'athists under one political umbrella. Mohammed Al-Qaq, Secretary-General of the National Movement for Direct Democracy (a committee member) says that "the ideas of the committee members are different, but the situation of Palestine puts us in the same camp." The committee frequently organizes (or attempts to organize) anti-Israel rallies in which party leaders call for the expulsion of the Israeli Ambassador, annulment of the "Wadi Araba" peace agreement between Jordan and Israel, and renewed "struggle" against Jordan's western neighbor.

¶6. (C) Despite its overarching anti-normalization focus, the committee is rhetorically active on a number of issues. In recent months, the committee has issued more frequent statements on the government's handling of the economy.

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Perhaps surprisingly, the statements do not call for a rollback of the decision to liberalize fuel prices. Rather, the committee takes the more cautious stance of calling for the government to "stop making the citizen bear the burden of resolving the economic crisis." In a statement on March 11, the committee proposed further increases in government salaries and a more effective tax collection system that would increase government revenue.

Support For Hamas - A Wedge Issue?

¶7. (C) Despite the anti-Israel, anti-normalization foundation of the committee, IAF support for Hamas is a thorny point for its members. 'Aliya was quick to note that the committee "agrees on many shared points, but there is disagreement on using the committee to support the IAF's position on Hamas." Qaq noted that the IAF "cannot force its opinion on others," adding that the committee's members are keenly aware of the limits support for Hamas would place on the collective's policy appeal within Jordanian society.

¶8. (U) In an interview with the Islamist daily Al-Sabil in January, IAF Secretary-General Zaki Beni-Irshaid recognized that not every party in the committee agrees that supporting Hamas is politically profitable, but renewed his calls for a united front on the issue. "Some (of the parties) wanted to contravene the bases on which we agreed. The positions of some parties are close to the Wadi Araba trench and the official government positions."

¶9. (U) In January, the Hamas issue caused a tit-for-tat exchange between different members of the committee - one that leaked into the public sphere. The committee had apparently agreed to approach the government with a combined request to hold a demonstration against Israeli actions in Gaza. Yet after the march was approved, the IAF reportedly informed the committee that it would use the demonstration to issue statements of support for Hamas. As a result, some parties (although not all of them) boycotted the event. In response, the IAF later boycotted a ceremony organized by the two Ba'athist parties on the committee to commemorate the

anniversary of Saddam Hussein's death.

Who Is Using Whom?

¶10. (C) In spite of the occasional display of dissension within the ranks, the IAF clearly dictates the policy direction of the committee. As the only member with actual representation in parliament and an effective grassroots organization, the IAF occupies a political space in Jordanian society that the other members of the committee can only aspire to. Qaq says that the IAF is on another level politically than the other members - not only does it have a real organization in Jordan, but it is also part of an international movement. "I'm a secularist, but I respect (IAF Secretary-General) Zaki Bani-Irshaid," he says.

¶11. (C) The key question that haunts members of the committee is the extent to which they are willing to be used to further the IAF's political goals in exchange for access to the bully pulpit which the IAF commands. 'Aliya stresses that while the IAF is the most prominent member of the committee, it does not mean that the parties are in agreement about its political and social agenda. Quite the contrary - 'Aliya notes that the committee is a consensus body. "What we agree on, we announce," he says. Qaq adds that the loose structure of the committee allows the parties to disagree on the details while coming together on broader stances. "The IAF is free to believe that 'Islam is the solution,' and the communists are free to believe that the USSR is the solution," he says. Responding to a January report on Al-Jazeera that disagreements within the committee would soon cause its dissolution, Fuad Dabbour of the Ba'ath Party stated that "differences in viewpoints and opinions have existed since the establishment of the committee," yet the media has "exaggerated" their significance.

¶12. (C) While the IAF is using the members of the committee as proxy voices, there are mutual benefits. Some parties seem to be using the IAF's outsize political presence to increase their visibility and advance the issues that interest them. The rotating chairmanship of the committee allows the smaller parties to make media statements that would otherwise be ignored by higher circulation pro-government media outlets. Public rallies and demonstrations are frequently organized under the committee's name but effectively populated by the Muslim Brotherhood's political machine, giving committee members the chance to air their issues in front of a much larger audience than they could command alone.

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¶13. (C) The committee's recent attempts to organize a demonstration against the sixtieth anniversary of Israel serve as an illuminating example of how the IAF uses the other parties and vice versa. The IAF submitted a demonstration request of its own to the governor of Amman on April 24. Three weeks later, that request was denied. In spite of strong statements against the decision by the IAF and a chiding op-ed in the London-based Al-Quds newspaper, the governor refused to reverse his stand. In a meeting with poloff, the governor said that he also met with the IAF personally to try and convince them to moderate their tone in exchange for permission to demonstrate on their own, but to no avail.

¶14. (C) The IAF then tried another route, applying for a demonstration permit through the committee. In the revised application, the IAF's role was watered down - its chairman Zaki Bani-Irshaid was only one of many speakers. This proposal was accepted (at the last minute), and the demonstration went forward as planned. Note: In a somewhat comic protest, the IAF also organized a sit-in within their own offices, thereby bypassing the necessity for asking permission from the governor. End Note. The IAF was allowed

to have its day in the sun, but had to use the committee to get it. In exchange, the committee members were allowed to share the stage with their more powerful ally. Media reports gave credit to "opposition parties" for organizing the rally rather than the IAF alone.

An Umbrella Party?

¶15. (C) When asked about the possibility of the committee becoming an umbrella political party of some kind, 'Aliya believed that it was possible, especially under the recently enacted political party rules. Even so, 'Aliya denied that a firm movement to combine the parties was in the cards for the foreseeable future. "We can't see that far into the future - right now we're just focusing on the present," he said. Qaq agreed, saying that it would be a "step by step" process.

¶16. (C) There are legal advantages to keeping the committee as an ad hoc body. Combining the members of the various parties into one bloc would bring scrutiny from the Ministry of Interior, and a set of rules that the members would have to comply with. As it currently stands, the committee is not even registered as an association, has no budget, and has no official rules. This allows it to effectively operate without fear of government intervention or oversight - the powers that be have no leverage with a political entity that has no legal personality.
Hale